WHEN · LINCOLN KISSED · ME

· HENRY · E · WING ·

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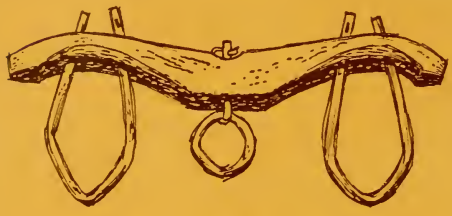

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WHEN LINCOLN KISSED ME

A STORY OF THE WILDERNESS CAMPAIGN

BY

HENRY E. WING

Formerly Correspondent of the New York Tribune
with the Army of the Potomac

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A BIT OF HISTORY

THE REV. HENRY E. WING, who so interestingly tells this Lincoln story, is a member of the New York East Conference. Twenty years of his ministry were spent in Iowa, but since 1892 he has made his home in the East. At the time of the events narrated Mr. Wing was correspondent for the New York Tribune, assigned to the Army of the Potomac. To his intimate friends he has long been known as a raconteur of unusual ability, with experiences in varied fields well worthy of permanent record. His modesty, however, is as characteristic as his story-telling.

The appearance of this and other war-time stories after a lapse of fifty years is due almost wholly to the

efforts of the Rev. Dr. F. B. Upham, of Brooklyn, New York, who recognized the unusual quality of Mr. Wing's experiences and brought them to the attention of the Editor of The Christian Advocate and the Book Editor of the Methodist Episcopal Church. The literary and historic value of Mr. Wing's work was so evident that it was immediately determined to publish this story, first in the pages of The Christian Advocate and afterward in this more permanent form. The Christian Advocate well says, "It will be evident to all who read this thrilling narrative that he sacrificed an opportunity for literary distinction in order that he might become a Methodist preacher."

D. G. D.

WHEN LINCOLN KISSED ME

Anxious Days

N May 4, 1864, a great army of citizen soldiers, comprising representatives of hundreds of thousands of families from every Northern community, had vanished without warning, leaving absolutely no sign of their destination or hint even of the direction in which they had disappeared. There followed three or four days of such heart-breaking apprehension and bewilderment as the loyal nation had never before experienced. I did not then comprehend, and probably cannot yet quite appreciate, the tension of painful anxiety that held the whole country in its

grip and which it became my good fortune later to relieve.

It may be noted that this slipping away of the army from all communication with the capital was intentional and deliberate. A study of previous "advances," under the surveillance of parties in authority inexperienced in military affairs, will disclose one motive for bringing Grant east to take personal charge of this campaign. This will also furnish the key to the letter from the President to him, written a short week before the movement was made, in which he says: "The particulars of your plans I neither know nor seek to know."

BEGINNING THE CAMPAIGN

The great campaign "by the left flank" that was to end at Appomattox nearly a year afterward was begun from

about Culpeper on the early morning of May 4, 1864. "The objective point," Grant had written to Meade, "will be Lee's army. Where he goes there you will go also." Lee's army was at and about Orange Court House. Between Culpeper and this first "objective point"—moving by the left, to possibly get between Lee and his capital—flowed the Rapidan River, and beyond that stretched the almost impenetrable "wilderness."

The immediate undertaking was to get the Union army of more than one hundred thousand men over into the open country before Lee could intercept it. This was no small task. There were actually but two miserable and narrow roads: one across Germania Ford and by Old Wilderness Tavern, toward Spottsylvania, the other across Ely's Ford, and, skirting the

wilderness, to Chancellorsville. Over these two highways, for an average distance of twenty-five miles, before Lee could fall upon them, were to be pushed something like thirty miles of marching infantry, ten miles of cavalry, five miles of artillery, and sixty miles of army wagons. It is evident that the key to the success of this initial movement was *push*.

The second corps (Hancock's), escorted by Gregg's division of cavalry, crossed at Ely's Ford in the early morning (May 4) and reached the open country, near Chancellorsville, about noon. Here, in a splendid position for a great battle, Hancock spent the afternoon intrenching and extending his lines westward to certainly get between Lee and Richmond. Meanwhile Warren with his fifth corps crossed at Germania Ford and worked

his way down by the Tavern till he reached the junction of the Orange Court House Turnpike. Instead of pushing right on and joining Hancock he halted here, and got into position for a possible attack by Lee, leaving Sedgwick with his sixth corps "bottled up" in the narrow road two or three miles behind him, and Hancock cut off from all support, five or six miles in front. Here, on Thursday morning, May 5, Lee found us. And here ensued the dreadful Battle of the Wilderness.

I am not writing a history of that great campaign—not even the story of this first grapple between those matchless chieftains, Grant and Lee. But, following what I have already set down, it may properly be said that had Sedgwick instead of the over-cautious Warren led the column across the upper ford, there would have been no "Battle

of the Wilderness," but one which might have been decisive, on the open plains beyond.

THE MESSAGE TO LINCOLN

The New York Tribune had four correspondents in the field, of whom I was one, attached at that time to the second corps. At the close of the first day's fighting, we came together at army headquarters to compare notes and to lay plans for the future. The battle was to be renewed the next morning. It was an open secret that Meade had suggested a retreat across the river under cover of the night and a fresh start over some more promising route, and that Grant had vetoed the proposition and had ordered the lines to be formed for an assault upon the enemy at daybreak.

It was very quickly decided that one

HENRY E. WING
War Correspondent

of us should start for the North with the several reports of the stirring events of the last two or three days. As I was the youngest, I knew the task naturally belonged to me, and my offer to undertake it was instantly accepted by the others. It was known to be an adventurous undertaking. The Ninth corps was already crossing the Rapidan to support the fortunes of the battle-line in front, and thus by tomorrow the whole country between the Rapidan and the Bull Run Rivers was to be abandoned by our troops. How full of peril the enterprise really was may be inferred from the fact that of four or five messengers for different newspapers I was the only one who had the good fortune to get through.

My favorite mount was a Kentucky-bred racing horse, that I had procured from Captain Cline, Meade's chief of

scouts. As soon as it was decided that I should make the trip I went up to the corral, and instructed the "boy" to give Jesse a hearty breakfast at three o'clock in the morning, and to have him groomed and saddled at four. He might have to take me more than seventy miles to Washington—possibly without even a feed or halt—the following day.

I then went up to Grant's headquarters, and, approaching him, said that I was coming out the next day, and asked him if he had any message to the people that I could insert in my dispatches to the Tribune.

"Well, yes," he replied, "you may tell the people that things are going swimmingly down here."

The remark was so evasive, or purposely misleading, at the close of a battle in which every one of his plans

had evidently gone wrong that I smiled as I entered the exact words in my note book, thanked him, and turned away. I had only taken a step or two when he got up and joined me. When we had walked out of hearing of his companions he laid his hand upon my shoulder and, quietly facing me, inquired, "You expect to get through to Washington?"

I replied that that was my purpose, and that I should start at daybreak.

Then, in a low tone, he said: "Well, if you see the President, tell him from me that, whatever happens, there will be no turning back." He silently gave me his hand in farewell greeting, and we parted.

THROUGH THE ENEMY'S COUNTRY

At four o'clock the next morning, after three hours of sound sleep and a

light breakfast, I was in the saddle. In my saddlebags were the general reports of march and battle, to fill at least a whole page of the Daily Tribune, and strapped behind was a good feed of oats for my trusty comrade.

I had worked out a splendid plan—for getting captured. On Wednesday morning (only the day before yesterday: but how long ago it seemed!), riding with the second corps, my journalistic companion was Mr. Waud, of Harper's Weekly. After crossing at Ely's Ford he took me up the river a few miles to some silver mines. Here was an acquaintance of his, a Mr. Wykoff, of Brooklyn, New York, who, too far advanced in life to be drafted into the Confederate service, had stayed to look after mining properties, owned by Northern capitalists. My scheme now was, to get Mr. Wykoff to go along

with me, at least across the country to the Rappahannock River, guiding me by by-roads and cattle-trails with which he must be familiar through that portion of my route, in the immediate rear of our army, and most likely to be overrun by bands of guerrillas and scouting parties of the enemy's cavalry. So I turned Jesse's head toward Culpeper mines and, in a short time, was at Mr. Wykoff's door.

Mr. Wykoff dismissed my proposal without the slightest hesitation. He was known through all that neighborhood as an uncompromising Union man, and no course could be devised that would more surely defeat my purpose than to be found in his company. He was almost certain that I would fail in my undertaking; but when he realized that I was determined to try

he elaborated the scheme to which I was to owe my success at last: *I must be going to Washington;* and I must have an errand there that would justify my haste, and that would win the sympathy, and possible coöperation, of the enemy. So this was my story: There had been a great battle, in which the Yankee army had been overwhelmingly defeated; and I was hurrying with the good news to our friends in Washington. To fortify me in the prosecution of this adventure Mr. Wykoff made me familiar with the names of a half dozen prominent Southern sympathizers in the capital city. Then he wisely determined that I was too well dressed for the part. The Tribune took pride in having its representatives well equipped, and my outfit included pantaloons of the most costly Irish corduroy, a fine "buck-

skin" jacket, a dark, soft felt hat, calf-skin boots, and Alexandra kid gloves. These I exchanged for a regular "Butternut" suit, with coarse, broad "brogans" and a disreputable hat of quilted cotton.

While these preparations were being made a troop of gray cavalry passed up the river on the opposite bank, and it became nearly certain that I was to fall in with many such parties. No loyal man would take through our lines, when there was possibility of capture, a scrap of paper that would convey information to the enemy; so I destroyed my precious budget of correspondence and all notes and memoranda that could possibly disclose information of value. And, for my own safety, I divested myself of all private papers, by which I could be identified. Then, bidding farewell to

the loyal man to whose wise counsel I undoubtedly owe my life, I set out on my long and hazardous journey.

AMONG MOSBY'S TROOPERS

About eight miles on the way was the little hamlet of Richardsville, at which point Mr. Wykoff had advised me to take a blind trail across to Field's Ford, on the Rappahannock. I reached there, having encountered but one small squad of Confederate scouts, with whom I had no difficulty. I was much encouraged by my experience thus far; and, once across the Rappahannock, the country I was to travel was likely to be practically abandoned.

But right now I came to a troop of Mosby's troopers. They were lying about in a dooryard, with their horses feeding outside the fence. As I was riding leisurely by they naturally hailed

ULYSSES S. GRANT

me, and, gathering about, received my good tidings of Lee's victory with great rejoicing. But, as to my going on alone!—the woods were full of skulking "nigger" soldiers—stragglers from Ferraro's division of colored troops, and the life of a good rebel, like me, would not be worth "a chaw-er-ter-backer." The sequel was that they furnished me an escort of two men to protect me on the way. I was now having the "run of luck" which had been rather a distinguishing feature of my career since boyhood. Two men, mounted and armed, ragged and dirty enough to be my fit companions, were to give me respectable standing with their neighbors, and were to defend me from the ravaging black man.

I supposed that we were on our way to Field's Ford, but, coming over the brow of a hill, I recognized the scene

before me. We were at Kelly's Ford; and Mr. Kelly, a one-armed man—at heart a bitter secessionist—had "entertained" me for two days while our troops were in that neighborhood. He would almost certainly recognize me in even this disguise unless I could slip by unobserved. So I dismissed my kind companions with many thanks, as I was now sure of myself, and they had been in the saddle all night.

Once rid of my escort I started for the ford, but Mr. Kelly was standing on a knoll above his house, listening to the roar of the distant battle, and, hastening across to the road, he intercepted me. I drew my slouching hat brim down over my face, but he recognized me and reached for the bridle. As he did so I touched Jesse with the spur and he sprang forward and rushed for the river. In answer to Mr. Kelly's

shouts, my erstwhile comrades, joined by two other mounted men, came dashing after me. In my confusion we missed the ford, but Jesse swam boldly through the deep waters to the upper shore. As he scrambled up the steep bank a volley of scattering shots spattered about us.

I was now in excellent spirits. I was mounted on a horse that had never been overtaken. Besides, my proverbial "luck" could certainly be depended on. But just then I made one of those sad mistakes that so frequently interrupt and defeat the good offices of Dame Fortune. I should have kept right on east through a sparsely settled country to Warrenton Junction; but a piece of thick timber at the left hand invited me to turn aside into a wood path, and in ten minutes I burst into the clearing about

Rappahannock Station, on the Orange and Alexandria Railroad. Here were five hundred people, of all ages and both sexes, loading carts and wagons with abandoned army supplies. I could not ride through the crowd on a gallop without attracting attention, so I pulled Jesse down to a walk, and no one accosted me.

I turned to the right and, once past the village, tried to put Jesse forward at his best gait toward Washington, but the road was so encumbered with vehicles and cavalrymen that I could make but slow progress. It would excite suspicion if I did not greet everyone who accosted me, and, of course, I had to satisfy the scrutiny of the numerous squads of Confederate patrol. While my story was finally accepted by everyone I met, my progress was constantly interrupted, and some-

where behind me were my comrades of the morning, gathering recruits as they came and bent on my capture.

With a clear road, on a horse that had never been outstripped, I would have enjoyed the contest, but every moment in which I was halted and questioned increased my peril until I was certain that I could never get through in the saddle. My only chance was in abandoning my horse. But, leaving him in the highway would result in my certain capture, before I could get out of the neighborhood.

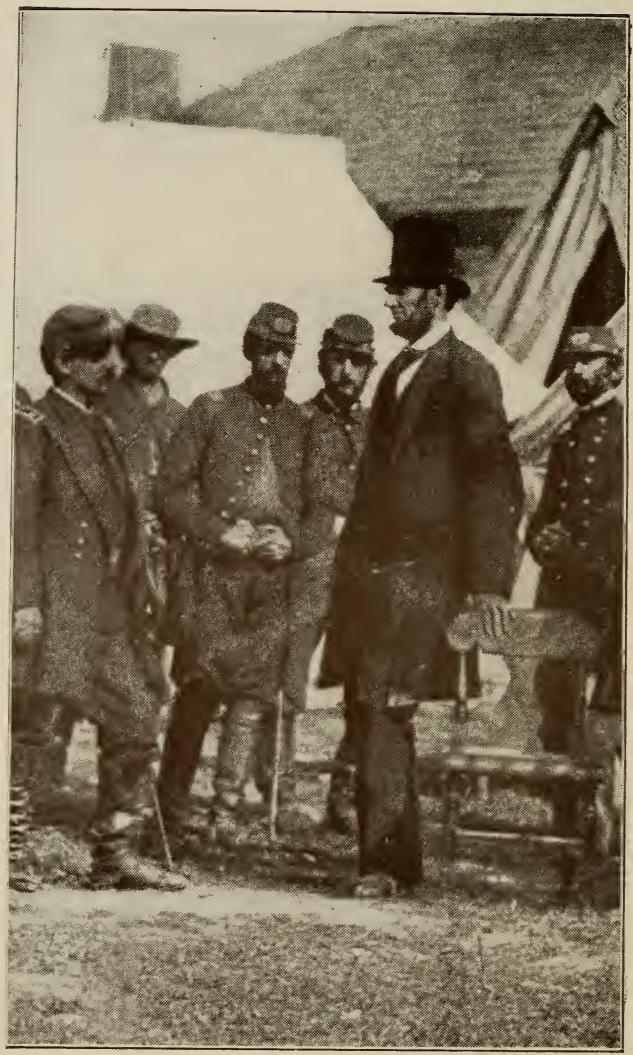
Just then my apparently ever-present good fortune again came to my aid. A clump of trees with thick underbrush a few yards from the road offered "shelter for man and beast." Watching an opportunity, when no one was in sight, I led Jesse into this safe retreat. Slipping off saddle and bridle and hid-

ing them away, I tied my good friend by a long rein to an overhanging branch, poured the oats upon the ground, and bade him a really "affectionate farewell."

Before I crept out of my hiding place a dozen men, led by my quondam friends, came galloping by. They were evidently in quest of a good-looking youngster, in a butternut suit, riding a handsome chestnut Kentucky thoroughbred. If they are looking yet, this may inform them that we are not thereabouts. Even Jesse is not there, for, in fulfillment of a sacred promise to him, I sneaked back the next Sunday and brought him out.

TRAMPING THE TIES

The hiding away of that horse was fortunate for me, for it evidently put my pursuers completely off the scent.



PRESIDENT LINCOLN IN THE CAMPS

I crawled over to the railroad and started on my long tramp up the track for our lines about Washington. I frequently lay for several minutes flat in the weeds and grass, cruelly tormented by swarms of insects, while parties passed within sight. It took me over an hour to get around Warrenton Junction, where as at Rappahannock Station, scores of people were gathered picking up and packing off the debris of the deserted Union camps.

Then came a great surprise. Hastening through a cut and around a curve in the road, I encountered an armed man. My first impression was that he was one of Mosby's guerrillas, disguised, as they frequently were, in the uniform of the patriot troops; but his voice, as he ordered me to halt, gave me assurance, for in all my intercourse with Confederates I had never

heard the Irish brogue from the lips of a disloyal person. He proved to be a private of one of our Irish regiments (I think the Sixty-ninth New York). They had been here all winter, I believe, as guard of the bridge across Cedar Creek; and, by some mistake, had received no orders to break camp and join in the general advance. Being an infantry regiment, they had no large guns, but they had mounted their breastworks with "Quaker" cannon—logs, with the ends blackened with charcoal. These looked very formidable to the gray cavalrymen circling about at a safe distance, but, on close examination, as a sergeant remarked, "they were almost too natural to be real."

I got a good dinner here and lots of good cheer. As there were several parties in sight, and I was to resume

the rôle of Southern sympathizer, I arranged with these people to fire a volley toward me as I "escaped" across the bridge. From there, in mid-afternoon, I passed Catlett's Station safely, and made my way without noteworthy incident to Manassas Junction.

At Manassas Junction I got caught at last. Here was a regularly organized Confederate cavalry camp—really an outpost to protect all the country, from the Bull Run to the Rapidan, recently abandoned by our troops, from incursion by the forces about the capital. As I approached the place so much vigilance was manifest that I abandoned the idea of creeping past, deeming it safer to walk boldly into the camp. I told my story, with the purpose of pressing right forward on my mission, but the major in command was absent, and the lieutenant in tem-

porary charge did not feel justified in letting me go on.

Here I waited three or four hours, getting more impatient as the time went by, and more uneasy, lest some one might come in from below, with a description of a certain fugitive in whom I had a vital interest. At last dusk came on and then I did a very ungentlemanly thing. Without any expression of thanks to these extremely attentive people, or any polite message for the gallant major, at whose headquarters I had been entertained with such steadfast and scrupulous solicitude, I crawled out between the guards and broke away up the track for the Bull Run River, six miles distant. Reaching there, as I came across the trestle, a Union picket took me in and sent me to the post headquarters, at Union Mills, near-by. The

officer in command, a kind, well-bred Frenchman, remembered me as having visited the post from Washington a few weeks previous. And here, at last, safe within our lines, my story of adventures might end; except that here, at last also, difficulties less exciting but, if possible, more formidable, and certainly much more annoying, were awaiting me.

AT ONE END OF A WIRE

I found that I was the first newspaper man—indeed, the only man from the front—to cross Bull Run River. This made my news doubly valuable. The nearest public telegraph station was at Alexandria, twenty miles away. That office would close at midnight. To accomplish my "beat" on all the other papers I must make that twenty miles in three hours.

At that time "A horse! a horse!" was my mental exclamation if not an actual one, and I offered all sorts of sums up to a thousand dollars for a horse and guide to Alexandria. But no horse was to be had at any price. Five hundred dollars was my offer for a hand-car and a husky man to help me run it, but "the car belonged to the government." That statement gave me an idea: the government had a telegraph wire out there, with an operator. I would not confess what this "idea" was except to make this narrative complete, and, furthermore, to illustrate that spirit of emulation in a reporter which may tempt him sometimes to adopt desperate measures in the interest of his paper. I knew that no messages except those strictly on government business and under military con-

trol were ever permitted over one of these wires. Nevertheless, I was bent on "subsidizing" that operator, at whatever cost, to send out just a few words to the Tribune Bureau at Washington. But before I reached the telegraph office this scheme was abandoned as impracticable. And I will give out this hint now to any one who may contemplate such a transaction: It takes two operators to get a telegram through, and only one of them will be within your "sphere of personal approach."

Even as I discarded this plan another suggested itself. The Hon. Charles A. Dana was a personal friend of mine, and was Assistant Secretary of War. If I could get him on the wire, something might possibly be done; so I wrote a dispatch, as a "feeler," directed to him, officially, as follows:

"I am just in from the front. Left Grant at four o'clock this morning."

(This, by the way, was all that I had told anybody, lest any real news might "leak.") A response came immediately, but from Secretary Stanton:

"Where did you leave General Grant?"

What? Even the government had no knowledge of events at the front? I had stored away under that faded cloth hat all the information there was of the momentous movements across the Rapidan. But I would be modest and generous: if Mr. Stanton would let me send one hundred words over the government line, I would tell him all that I knew. On a repetition of the demand, in more peremptory terms, I replied that my news belonged to the New York Tribune, and that he would have to negotiate with them for its release. But I renewed my offer.

GENERAL GRANT AT HEADQUARTERS
ARMY OF THE POTOMAC

ARRESTED AS A SPY

Five minutes afterward, at a call from the operator, the post commander came in. He looked at a telegram handed him; and he then informed me that Mr. Stanton had ordered my arrest as a spy unless I would uncover my news from the front. Of course that settled it. I would not have told him one little word to save my life. But here I was at the end of my resources. It had been my purpose, if he finally refused my offer, to start afoot for Alexandria in a frantic effort to make the twenty miles by midnight, but now there was nothing to be done but to submit. This news, that the whole country was lying awake for, was tied up here with a strip of dirty red tape. And the young man who to get it here had been shot at, and chased, and

captured; who had masqueraded as a loathsome "copperhead," who had told two hundred lies, and who had even seriously contemplated committing a felony, was to be locked up in a moldy, rat-infested guard house!

Hardly that. On giving my parole not to run away I could have the freedom of the camp. (Did I not say that this officer was a gentleman? A gentleman and a true soldier, he was.) I lay down on a bench in the little station, hungry, tired, disgusted, and, for the first time, utterly discouraged.

LINCOLN VERSUS STANTON

Then something occurred that I cannot explain. I knew nothing of the telegraph code, yet, as a message was being ticked off on the tape, some subtle current of influence touched my

apprehension. I knew that it was for me. I sprang to my feet.

"What is it?" was my question.

"Mr. Lincoln wants to know if you will tell him where Grant is."

I repeated my offer—to communicate whatever information I had, for the use of the wire to transmit one hundred words. He accepted my terms without hesitation, only suggesting that my statement to my paper be so full as to disclose to the public the general situation.

Nothing now was the matter with me. I was neither tired, hungry, nor sleepy. Standing by the operator at Union Mills, I dictated the half-column dispatch which appeared in the Tribune on the morning of Saturday, May 7, 1864. Mr. Lincoln, with his characteristic thoughtfulness for the public interests, arranged for the trans-

fer to the Associated Press of a short summary of the news, and thus the anxiety of the whole country was set at ease.

ALONE WITH LINCOLN

A locomotive was sent down for me, and about two o'clock in the morning I reached the White House, where the President had gathered his official family to meet me. As I stepped into the room where they were seated my glance caught a quick gleam of surprise and apprehension in Mr. Lincoln's eyes, and I was awakened to a sense of my disreputable appearance. My hair was disheveled, my shabby old coat was dusty and wrinkled, my pantaloons, much too long, were folded back at the bottom and gathered about my ankles with pieces of cotton twine, and my coarse shoes

were coated three or four layers thick with "sacred soil." I had met, perhaps, every one of this company at public functions or in private interviews, but not one of them recognized me in this garb. As my glance swept around the group it rested on the genial countenance of a particular friend, Mr. Welles, of Hartford, Connecticut, the Honorable Secretary of the Navy. As I advanced and accosted him he identified me by my voice. He then presented me, with much embarrassing formality, to the others.

A half hour or more was spent in description of the movements of the troops, and in explanation, from a large map on the wall, of the situation at the time when I left. Then, as the company was dispersing, I turned to Mr. Lincoln, and said: "Mr. President, I have a personal word for you."

The others withdrew and he closed the door and advanced toward me. As he stood there I realized as never before how tall he was. I looked up into his impassive face, ready to deliver Grant's message. He took a short, quick step toward me, and, stooping to bring his eyes level with mine, whispered, in tones of intense, impatient interest, "What is it?"

I was so moved that I could hardly stammer: "General Grant told me to tell you, from him, that, whatever happens, there is to be no turning back."

The vision that opened through those wonderful eyes from a great soul glowing with a newly kindled hope is the likeness of Mr. Lincoln that I still hold in my memory, and ever shall. And that hope was never to be extinguished. Others had "turned back." Every other one had. But

there had come an end of that fatal folly.

Mr. Lincoln put his great, strong arms about me and, carried away in the exuberance of his gladness, imprinted a kiss upon my forehead. We sat down again; and then I disclosed to him, as I could not do except in the light of that pledge of the great commander, all the disheartening details of that dreadful day in the wilderness. But I could assure him that the Army of the Potomac, in all its history, was never in such hopeful spirit as when they discovered, at the close of a day of disappointment, that they were not to "turn back."